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ABSTRACT

"Death in Literature," a nine-week elective course for high school juniors and seniors, was added to the English curriculum at a Kansas City high school in 1976. It has proved very popular with students and is being expanded to 18 weeks. The explicit objectives of the course are to help students to explore the theme of death in various types of literature, to learn about the diversity of views and behaviors pertaining to death and dying, to relate their own concerns and experiences relating to death, and to learn about changing attitudes concerning death that have occurred in the United States through the years. Among the implicit course objectives are to help students develop a toleration of different points of view, behavior, and beliefs, and to make them aware that people, institutions, and beliefs change. It is hoped that students gain insight into literature, themselves, and others through the course and that they also improve their language skills. (GT)

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DEATH IN LITERATURE

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DEATH IN LITERATURE

Death in Literature is a nine week literature course offered as an elective to high school juniors and seniors at the 7 year old Harmon High School, in Kansas City, Kansas. It began with a question from a local funeral director in 1975. He asked if I had ever thought about teaching a course related to death. I hadn't, but I knew from reading students' poetry and essays for 14 years, that death was a subject which was on the minds of youth. Therefore, it seemed to be a likely possible addition to the Language Arts curriculum. After pondering the possibilities and reviewing the small amount of literature available on death and courses on death existing at that time (there were 500 related courses then, over 2,000 now), I decided to propose a course entitled Death in Literature, in outline form to my principal. He agreed that the topic was an important one for teenagers and also agreed to present the course outline to the Language Arts Supervisor and the people in the central office charged with the responsibility of sanctioning the inclusion of new courses in a high school's curriculum once the school had begun operating. After some skepticism and reluctance on the part of some of the "high-ups," it was agreed that the course would be added to the list from which students at Harmon could choose English courses. If they chose it, O.K.; if they didn't, O.K.

They chose it, enough students for four sections the spring semester of 1976. It has been taught each semester since a total of 24 sections with approximately 720 students.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS

Both male and female students enroll in Death in Literature. It attracts about 37% males, 63% females, and is designed for general ability students, as opposed to courses aimed at remedial and college-bound students, although students of these two groups can and do enroll.

Harmon is a cosmopolitan school, including Oriental, American Indian, Spanish-sur named, Black and Caucasian students. Those students who enroll in Death in Literature are representative of these groups.

Because the course is elective, it has competed for its continued existence with other elective classes offered by the English Department. Death in Literature has held its own against the so-called competition; it has continually ranked in the top three of elective courses selected, determined on the basis of number of students enrolled each semester. With the spring semester 1979-80 Death in Literature will be expanded to 18 weeks. How this will affect its future is anybodys guess at the moment.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT OBJECTIVES

The explicit objectives of Death in Literature are bound up with the type of course it is: literature.

One of its objectives is to allow students to explore the theme of the course in various types of literature.

A second is to expose students to the diversity of views and behaviors pertaining to death and dying.

A third objective is to give students the opportunity to express, in various ways, their own ideas, concerns, and experiences relating to course's theme.

Another objective is to aid students to become aware of changes in attitudes and beliefs concerning death which have occurred in the United States through the years.

These objectives are met first, through reading and studying literature: novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction and pl ys. Secondly, the students are exposed to films and speakers who discuss topics related to the theme of the class. Thirdly, they do both creative and expository writing on subjects pertaining to the theme. For example in Death in Literature the students read Eric, a non-fiction account of a young man's losing battle with leukemia. The poems they tackle include "To an Athlete Dying Young," "Auto Wreck," and "I Have a Rendezvous with Death." Our Town is read in class and The Death of Ivan Ilych, the Tolstoy novelette, is sometimes read. The students write obituaries and epitaphs, as well as essays and poems on subjects related to death and dying.

They have the opportunity to hear different ideas and see different customs through films and guest speakers. These usually include a hospital nurse, a doctor, a minister and a funeral director. The speakers discuss their experiences with the dying person, his family, and his survivors and answer questions put to them by the students. These range all the way from "Do you believe in euthanasia?" and "How do you tell a person he is dying?" to "Has anyone ever raised up out of a casket?" and "Do you believe in vampires?"

Still another assignment involves the students using kindergarten crayons to draw their views of death and then either orally or in written form describing what they have drawn.

All of these activities and more are designed to meet the stated objectives of the courses. It is hoped they will meet some unstated objectives as well.

One of these implicit objectives is to help students develop a toleration of different points of view, behavior, and beliefs. This hopefully is accomplished in Death in Literature through films depicting the variety of death customs over the world, the speakers' presentations, and the class discussions on subjects related to death and loss. Students appear to question what they see and hear. They do not accept verbatim the views of others, but they seem to appreciate the opportunities to hear the views of adults and their peers. The exchanging of views with other class members seems of particular importance to the juniors and seniors in Death in Literature. It seems a revelation and a relief to some of them at times to discover that others share the same feelings, fears, and anxieties over such things as preparation of a body for burial, the feelings surrounding the loss of a loved person or animal, or what to say to a person who is dying. They compare their actions and reactions to those of literary characters as well, and their championing or rejecting of such behaviors and beliefs often leads to lively discussion.

It seems important to me that students realize that their opinions and customs are not the <u>only</u> ones--that there is great variety in the world on such things as disposal of a human body, and that these different methods are often dictated by practical considerations, such as climate, as well as by religious beliefs and societal mores. It is hoped that they will come to realize that different does not automatically equal inferior.

Another important unstated objective of Death in Literature is to help students become cognizant of the fact that people and institutions and ideas and beliefs change--that situations 100 years or even 10 years ago caused and perhaps even demanded different responses than today's. Many of them tend to judge everything on the basis of today's attitudes and therefore condemn the past actions of humans out of hand. Many seem to have little sense of history or awareness of the past conditions in their own society or other societies which affected the way of life. Reading a piece of fiction such as The Death of Ivan Ilych is an eye-opening experience for many of them. They are exposed to customs and beliefs different from their own, and they are forced into a different time frame. In order to understand the motivation of the characters they must know something of the world these characters were part of. Then, hopefully, by comparing our world with theirs, they can indeed see that "things, they are a changing." Perhaps they can also apply this principle to themselves and more readily accept change in others and know that they may themselves find it necessary to amend, modify or even completely alter ideas they have previously held.

I don't feel it is my right or responsibility as a teacher to dictate beliefs, but it is my duty to present ideas that students may accept, reject or partially include in their own systems of belief.

Teaching this course has been and continues to be a learning experience for me. I have been exposed to new ideas and customs and I hope developed a flexibility about such things, just as I hope my students have.

They seem to enjoy Death in Literature, even though many of them are apprehensive when they begin it. I hope they gain insight into literature and themselves and others from the course and improve some of their skills related to the use of the English language as well.